Jan Gyan Prakashan Series—89

AUM

WHAT IS YOGA ?

Dhanji Valji Velani

One should practise yoga with the help of the repetition of Om. By virtue of this practice of yoga one obtains the vision of the Supreme Self.

—*Swami Dayananda*

JAN GYAN PRAKASHAN
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JAN GYAN PRAKASHAN
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WHAT IS YOGA ?

1. What does Yoga mean ?

The word "yoga" is derived from the Sanskrit word "yuj" meaning to join, meet or come together. The English word "yoke" also comes from the same Sanskrit root. A yoke is a wooden stick joining two oxen together. Generally speaking the word "yoga" is used when two things are joined together. When yoga is used in connection with religion it signifies the union of man with God.

2. What is the aim of Yoga ?

Yoga is a system of discipline whereby the union of the individual soul with God (or the Absolute, or Supreme Reality) is made possible, its central aim being the contact of the finite individual self with the Infinite God.

Yoga is a mental and spiritual self-culture leading to the realisation of the nature of the Supreme Reality. Yoga embraces the three-fold nature of man, his mental, physical and spiritual elements. The development of all three aspects leads to the direct experience of God. It is for this reason that stress is laid upon the physical well-being of the individual as well as the mental aspect or concentration. Yoga is a scientific system which endeavours to transform the animalistic nature in man and make him aware of his true inner being, his spiritual nature.

3. Who brought about the system of Yoga and when ?

Yoga grew up in ancient Aryan society and was practised and developed by the Vedic Rishis. However, it was Patanjali, a spiritual giant, who made it a philosophy and gave it a truly scientific direction. The various steps of yoga, treated in a logical and scientific manner, appear in Patanjali's

"Yoga Sutras" or aphorisms. All branches of yoga follow Patanjali, who lived around 200 B.C.

4. Of what significance is Yoga to modern man ?

Today man has various ways to enjoy the material and sensual pleasures of life. He has advanced with giant strides in the scientific sphere commanding unlimited material and technological power and has ushered in the Space Age and the Age of the Computer. These achievements, however, have given him neither mental peace nor inner happiness. For peace of mind and inner tranquillity man must turn towards spiritual life and the practices of yoga. It is for these reasons that the lessons of yoga will be especially beneficial to modern man.

5. Is the path of Yoga a very difficult one ?

Yoga seems difficult as it lays stress upon self-discipline and sacrifice instead of on pleasure, a life of ease and luxury. For an ordinary man what is required in the practice of yoga every day is not difficult to achieve. Through constant daily practice one advances gradually along the path.

As the final stages of yoga, which are concentration and samadhi, may be attained only after a long time, faith, perseverance and patience must be exercised.

6. What is the relation between Yoga and Religion ?

Yoga is not different from religion, for the aim of both is the transformation of life in all its aspects. Both are concerned with the building of character. The supreme end and aim of yoga as well as religion is the attainment of God-realisation. That is why both wish to lead man along the path of righteousness which takes him to God.

The aspirant must place implicit trust in the guiding light of Providence or God.

It is for these reasons that yoga, its practice and principles, has a universal appeal, and can find acceptance by the followers of all religions—Hindu, Muslim, and Christian.

7. What status does Yoga enjoy with regard to Hindu Scriptures ?

The ancient Aryans gave a great deal of thought to the origin of the universe. Their search led them to the discovery that there was a Divine Power or an Ultimate Reality who created it. It was through the methods of intuition, and mystical realization that they arrived at the conclusion. This formed the foundation of the six systems of Hindu Philosophy, one of which is yoga.

8. What are these six philosophies and who are their authors ?

The six philosophies and their spiritual founders are given below :

1. Nyaya ... ... Gautama
2. Vaisheshika ... ... Kanada
3. Samkhya ... ... Kapila
4. Yoga ... ... Patanjali
5. Mimansa ... ... Jaimini
6. Vedanta ... ... Vyasa

9. Is there only one system of Yoga or are there several ?

The main principle underlying yoga is the realisation of God. But the expressions are many. As the result of differences in psychological types and varying aptitudes four main branches in yoga are recognised.

1. Dhyana or Raja Yoga
2. Karma Yoga
3. Jnana Yoga
4. Bhakti Yoga

10. What are the essential features of these four branches ?

1. Dhyana Yoga or Raja Yoga is essentially a mystical yoga, its distinguishing feature being meditation. Its aim is the withdrawal of the senses from their various objects of interest and then concentrating all the rays of the mind on one object.

2. Karma Yoga (Yoga of action or selfless service). In man's nature there is a quality tending to express itself in doing good to others. When a man helps others without

seeking any reward for himself, he is said to be doing Karma Yoga.

3. Jnana Yoga (Yoga of knowledge). In Jnana Yoga logic, wisdom and discrimination are used in the endeavour to realise what Truth is.

4. Bhakti Yoga (Yoga of devotion). The basic qualities of faith and love inherent in man find expression in Bhakti or devotion. The sadhak or aspirant offers wholehearted devotion and total self-surrender at the feet of the Lord. This is the essence of Bhakti.

11. Of these four which is the most important ?

Generally speaking by the word yoga is meant Raja Yoga or Dhyana Yoga. That is the way in which yoga is discussed in this article. However, taking into account diverse natures with their different tendencies and inclinations, any one of these four yogas is likely to have a greater appeal to a particular person. In order to achieve perfection, which is the goal and end of yoga, the aspirant must practise certain features of each yoga.

At times, for example, an aspirant who by nature is essentially a Jnana Yogi, may practise Bhakti by singing hymns in praise of the Divine Attributes of God. Progress is achieved by a synthesis of all the yogas.

12. What is Hatha Yoga ?

Hatha Yoga is a part of Raja Yoga. Before one does meditation, one should attempt the exercises in Hatha Yoga. The exercises, yogic postures or asanas and certain scientific breathing exercises, are emphasised. Other Hatha Yoga practices are engaged in for the purpose of keeping the body in perfect health.

These exercises do not only make a healthy body but also help to calm the mind, thus aiding spiritual progress.

13. What is the basic principle underlying yogic practices ?

Complete control of mind, conscious and unconscious, is necessary for success in yoga. Control of mind is the first

condition of yoga. For this reason Patanjali has declared in his most important verse : *Yogaschitta vritti nirodhah*, i.e. Yoga is the cessation of mental waves.

The nature of mind is to think, one desire always following another. Therefore the mind is full of desires and cravings. The animal-like passions and tendencies in man, like lust and greed, from which he derives immense pleasure are his weaknesses. They make him fall from the path of yoga. The natural tendencies spurring man to action are eating, sleeping fearing and procreating.

The mind, in order to gratify its desires, calls in the help of the five senses: seeing, hearing, feeling, tasting and smelling. When the mind clings to its desires it cannot reason between good and bad or discriminate between right and wrong. The mind then finds it very hard to free itself from the clutches of its six enemies: lust, anger, greed, pride, jealousy and ignorance.

Even when a person is treading of the path of righteousness, his mind drags him along the wrong direction. Through base desires evil habits are formed. Finally a man becomes a slave of his desires—hence the mind is the root of all miseries, dissatisfaction, frustration and unhappiness. But all desires will cease when all mental thoughts will cease. With the control of the mind in toto the path to success is barred no more.

14. How many methods can be used to control the mind ?

Patanjali gives two methods. The first is regular practice, the second non-attachment. Convinced of the spiritual ideal, the sadhak must persevere in the path with unflinching devotion and faith. This is called practice. Non-attachment is dispassion for the transitory pleasures of the world. When the mind no longer hankers after any desire, except the thirst for the Supreme Consciousness, non-attachment ensues.

These two methods are also shown in the Bhagvad Gita when Lord Krishna teaches Arjuna in Verse 35 of Chapter 6.

15. What are the Steps or Limbs of Yoga ?

The eight scientific steps of yoga Patanjali shows are famous under the name Ashtanga Yoga (ahsta: eight; anga:

limbs or steps). These eight are the constituents of yoga. The sadhak must proceed along these in an orderly fashion to achieve perfection. They are: (a) Yama; (b) Niyama; (c) Asana; (d) Pranayama; (e) Pratyahara; (f) Dharana; (g) Dhyana and (h) Samadhi.

The first two pertain to morals and ethics. Steps (c) to (e) refer to the external practice of yoga. Steps (f) to (h) refer to the internal practice.

16. What are Yamas and Niyamas ?

There are five Yamas: (1) Truthfulness; (2) Non-violence; (3) Non-stealing; (4) Brahmacharya or Celibacy; (5) Non-covetousness.

The Niyamas are also five: (1) Purification; (2) Contentment; (3) Austerity; (4) Study; (5) Devotion.

Clearly Yama embodies moral observances and Niyama physical discipline.

These ten together constitute the ten commandments of yoga.

17. How important are Moral and Ethical Precepts in Yoga ?

These ten commandments are important not only in yoga but also in life, providing for the support of life itself. Without them there can be no progress whether individual or social, for character is built out of them. Whether one believes in God or not the observance of morals is essential because without them nobody, even a scientist or a scholar or a genius can be called a true human being.

Without observing morals there can be no control of the mind. And, as the aim of yoga is mind-control, morals must be observed. Many aspirants have fallen from the path because they did not pay sufficient attention to morality. Moral precepts play an important part in concentrating the rays of the mind. For example, when a person is established in the practice of non-violence, not even under provocation will he become angry. Scriptural studies help one in establishing concentration and gradually purify his mind.

18. What are Asanas and what is their purpose ?

Asanas are system of exercises to make all parts of body strong, healthy and supple. Even those not practising the mystical aspects of yoga may do asanas to improve health. Asanas regulate breathing, ensure proper digestion of food and increase longevity. Asanas strengthen the nervous system, having a salutary effect on the brain centres and spinal cord. They relax the muscles.

19. What is Pranayama ?

Pranayama is a special method of breath-control with which prana or the life-force is brought under control and made regular. This is achieved by controlling the incoming and outgoing breaths.

20. What is Prana and its function ?

Normally it is assumed that the air which we breathe is prana. But prana is something else. It is a subtle life-force behind the breathing function. Breath is only a gross manifestation of the subtle energy we call prana. In fact, all functions of the body have prana as their life-force. For example, breathing, flickering of the eyelids, the heartbeat and circulation, digestion, etc. Prana is a conscious life-force in all living beings. It works together with the soul in all animals. We get prana from air, sunlight, water, vegetation and minerals of the earth.

21. How many types of Prana are there and what function do they serve ?

Prana has five forms: Prana, Apana, Samana, Vyana and Udana.

Prana. It is the chief of the five and is the governing power behind their functions, including breathing. The seat of Prana in the body is in the nose, mouth, eyes and ears.

Apana: With the aid of Apana waste materials are expelled via the kidneys and intestines. Apana is situated in the lower abdominal region.

Samana: Its function is the digestion of foods. Samana is located in the region around the navel.

Vyana: It regulates the circulation of the blood. Its seat is within the heart and in the veins and arteries.

Udana: Located in the nerve centres and in the brain it is their vitalising force. It is believed that even after death it is Udana that is responsible, by serving as a guiding vehicle, for the reincarnation of the soul.

The correct practice of Pranayama controls all activities of these five types of Prana.

22. How can we perform Pranayama ?

There are three main stages.

1. **Purak:** This is the way of drawing in breath slowly.
2. **Stambhak:** This is retention of breath.
3. **Rechak:** This is the way of letting out breath slowly.

These three exercises should be done with ease. When discomfort is felt while retaining the breath, it should be let out slowly. Through practice and proficiency the time taken may be increased. The time for Stambhak should be four times longer than Purak and Rechak should take twice the time of Purak.

These simple exercises improve health as they involve deep-breathing. However, one should be cautious about more involved and difficult Pranayama exercises as they can be dangerous, sometimes leading to ill-health and even insanity. They may be done only with the guidance of an expert.

Method of deep-breathing (as outlined by Mahatma Narayanswami in his "Daily Prayer").

(i) One should assume absolutely easy, sitting, squatting posture with one's chest, neck and head being in straight perpendicular position.

(ii) Breathe out slowly and when you have emptied yourself, hold out your breath for as long a time as you can conveniently do.

(iii) When you feel uneasy, then breathe in slowly and when you have filled yourself, hold in your breath for as long a time as you can conveniently.

(iv) When you feel uneasy in this action, then repeat breathing out as you did previously.

(v) These processes must be continued for a sufficiently long period of time to give through exercise to the whole system.

23. Is Pranayama good for us ?

Both Asanas and Pranayama have beneficial effects on body and mind. Pranayama ensures plenty of fresh air to the lungs, eventually purifying the entire system. Also the five Pranas will do their functions better than before as by these exercises their activities have been made regular.

Pranayama stills and quietens the restless mind thus making concentration and meditation easier to achieve.

It leads physically to strengthening of bodily powers, mentally to the concentration of intellectual powers and spiritually to the equipoise and harmony after which the devotee hankers. Pranayama is, therefore, meant to give us an all-round development of Self and its powers.

24. What should one think of during Pranayama ?

The aspirant should train all his faculties on God or the Absolute Parabrahman during Pranayama. For this japa of Om (repetition of Om) or the following formula or mantra may be used as it is a mantra meant for meditation.

Om Bhuh, Om Bhuvah, Om Swah, Om Mahah,

Om Janah, Om Tapah, Om Satyam.

O Giver of Life, Remover of Pains, Bestower of Happiness, the Greatest of Great, Creator of the Universe, Generator of all action, Embodiment of Truth ! I meditate on Thee.

While you are engaged in the process of deep-breathing, continue repeating and thinking over the meanings of Pranayama Mantra. The Mantra contains attributive epithets of God, which are to be realised and materialised in the life of the devotee. The contemplation of this hymn will ensure your contemplation of God, and the physical purification of the respiratory system which is the pivot of the entire nervous system constituting our body.

25. What is Pratyahara ?

Pratyahara means abstraction, the ability to withdraw the senses or internal organs from the centres or objects to which they are attached. The natural inclination of the senses towards the objects of enjoyment leads the mind astray.

When children in a classroom hear some loud noise outside they immediately look through the window and do not pay attention to their studies. But if their minds were engaged in their studies no noise or distraction would have the power to lead them astray.

So the ability to withdraw the senses from the objects of attachment is Pratyahara. Just as a tortoise withdraws all its limbs in the face of danger, an aspirant must completely withdraw his senses from their objects.

26. What is Dharana ?

When the mind is withdrawn from outside objects and is totally fixed on an idea or a centre it is said to be concentrate. In concentration all the rays of the mind are collected and fixed on a centre or idea.

No painter, sculptor, musician, sportsman, or student can hope to succeed if his mind is not engaged in the task on hand. So in yoga also, concentration or Dharana is essential.

27. What is Dhyana ?

When the mind is fully engaged on a particular thought or idea without interruption, it is said to be in Dhyana. Establishment of a concentrated mind on a particular thought or idea is called Dhyana.

In this state a person forgets his surroundings, his body or anything that is connected with him. Even the pleasures that interest him at other times or his pet fancies, or worries or tensions of his daily life do not trouble him whatsoever at this time.

For example, a painter, when engrossed in painting, will forget completely his surroundings, and will not hear anyone who may be calling him at the time. This proves his mind is one-pointed, totally absorbed in his work. In yoga, because

the object of concentration is God or the Absolute, all the powers of the mind are directed in the contemplation of God.

The mind of the yogi in the state of Dhyana is compared to the light of a lamp which burns without flickering in a windless place.

In this state the mind is calm and enjoys immense bliss, a foretaste of the uninterrupted bliss and boundless joy which is inherent in the very nature of God or the Supreme Consciousness.

28. What should be the centre on which Dhyana is focussed ?

Concentration should be on the nature of God or Parabrahman or Supreme Consciousness. The Vedas and Upanishadas describe the nature of Parabrahman, its attributes and functions. A deep study of the scriptures enables us to focus attention on Parabrahman.

Prayer and devotion lead the mind to concentration and then to meditation on God. Reflecting on the meaning of the Gayatri Mantra meditation on Parabrahman is made possible. The centre of meditation finally becomes Om which is the most suitable word to express the meaning of God.

Patanjali states : **Tasya vachakah Pranavah. Taj japah tadartha bhavanam**, Book 1, Sutra 27, 28. The meaning of this is that the principal name of God is OM and the yogi must constantly repeat Om, at the same time reflecting on its meaning. Chanting God's name or doing japa with the mind wandering elsewhere is clearly meaningless.

29. What should one do when the mind wanders while trying to concentrate ?

As the nature of the mind is to seek pleasure the aspirant should cultivate interest and joy in his daily devotions on God. For this reason satsang or prayer services as well as scriptural studies are helpful and even essential. Practice establishes one in the habit of meditation.

Sometimes the mind is too restless and it becomes a waste of time to try and meditate. The danger in trying to

force the restless mind is that one thinks it is meditating when in reality it is running in a thousand different directions. The best thing to do in such a case is to either get up and do Pranayama or read a religious book, or sing a devotional hymn (bhajan).

30. What is meant by Samadhi ?

Samadhi is the final state of meditation in yoga. In Pratyahara the mind is withdrawn from its external attachments and in Dharana the mind is concentrated on a single idea or thought. In Dhyana concentration becomes established or fixed.

When complete fixation is achieved, without any interruption in the steadiness of the concentrated faculties of the mind, meditation results.

Samadhi is the final step in meditation or contemplation. In meditation the final experience of the sadhaka is oneness with Parabrahman. Oneness with Parabrahman or the Supreme Consciousness is the true meaning of yoga. This final union with God confers supreme bliss, felicity, and end of all sorrows. This state transcends all thought and all logical processes such as thinking, reflecting and calculating cease to function. Samadhi is the final experience in which the yogi attains to a state of perfection, the crowning glory of success in the spiritual realm. This is yoga.

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PRINCIPLES OF THE ARYA SAMAJ

1. The first (efficient) cause of all true knowledge and all that is known through knowledge is Parameshvara (the Highest Lord, *i.e.*, God).

2. Ishvara (God) is existent, intelligent, and blissfull. He is formless, omniscient, just, merciful, unborn, endless unchangeable, beginningless, unequalled, the support of all, the master of all, omnipresent, immanent unaging, immortal, fearless, eternal, and holy, and the maker of all. He alone is worthy of being worshipped.

3. Vedas are the scriptures of true knowledge. It is the first duty of the Aryas to read them, teach them, recite them, and hear them being read.

4. One should always be ready to accept truth and give up untruth.

5. One should do everything according to the dictates of Dharma, *i.e.*, after due reflection over right and wrong.

6. Doing good to the whole world is the primary object of this Society—*i.e.*, to look to its physical, spiritual and social welfare.

7. Let thy dealings with all be regulated by love and justice, in accordance with the dictates of dharma.

8. One should promote Vidya (realization of subject and object) and dispel Avidya (Illusion).

9. One should not be content with one's own welfare alone, but should look for one's own welfare in the welfare of all.

10. One should regard one's self under restriction to follow altruistic rulings of society, while in following rules of individual welfare all should be free.

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